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Really, the RHS has an herbarium?



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Abstract

Previously thought of as the preserve of research scientists, natural science collections can make a real contribution to resolving many of society's current challenges, including environmental conservation, climate change, improving livelihoods, health and wellbeing.

Regrettably, we are living in an age where the teaching of taxonomy is becoming rarer in school and university curricula. Specimen-rich collection curators are relishing the opportunity to reach new audiences and explain the relevance of their collections in addressing the many societal issues encountered at present.

Using a series of events conducted at the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) throughout 2015 and early 2016, examples will be shown of inspiring visitors of all ages, from changing behaviours to just enjoying the dried ornamental plant collection for its own sake.

Keywords: RHS, Wisley, herbarium, engagement, audiences

Introduction

The [herbarium of the Royal Horticultural Society](#) (RHS) is based in the Laboratory at RHS Garden Wisley and is one of the largest in the world dedicated to cultivated plants. Funded by our members, it contains over 125,000 items comprising dried plant specimens, photographic slide and prints, watercolours of RHS award plants, and field notes from RHS-sponsored plant-hunting expeditions. Herbaria are marvellous places where we can enjoy our garden plants looking at their best all year round, revisiting old favourites long after the living plant may have died.

Although the current herbarium was established in the 1950s, some of our specimens are older, having been presented to the RHS from plant-hunting trips sponsored by the Society, or by



Figure 1. The Laboratory at RHS Garden Wisley, home to the herbarium. © The Royal Horticultural Society, 2017.

donation. The collection ranges from the earliest specimen dating from 1731, to ones made



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yesterday from the RHS gardens, RHS trials, Award winners, or Plant Heritage collections. We are exceptionally lucky to have a huge amount of source material contained in one building: the expedition notes, the specimens, the subsequent hybrids, the pests and diseases that affected them, and the subsequent papers and books written about the parents and their progeny, and of course amazing adjacent gardens growing living examples.



Figure 2. The collection contains source material, from expedition notes and images, to wild collections and the subsequent hybrids. © The Royal Horticultural Society, 2017.

As with other herbaria, the RHS herbarium is important for stabilising the naming of plants, as well as providing a record of plants grown in our gardens, as a resource for research and plant conservation. Our collection is particularly rich in 'Nomenclatural Standards', similar to type specimens, but for cultivars. To support this, we are digitising all of the plant specimens, making them accessible to our own members and an international audience via the internet. The collections are used continuously, for many purposes: to identify over 3,000 enquiries from RHS members; to aid horticultural student projects; they are loaned to other researchers and used by our botanists, curators, and volunteers to produce research papers, articles, books, and social media stories.

We are all too painfully aware that an unused collection is a dead collection, so the big question is: do enough users consult our collection, and do potential users know of our existence?

Engaging with audiences

In the past year, we have been attempting a number of ways to engage with both our current audience and new audiences, to inspire them with our collections. One way in which we regularly introduce people to the herbarium is through visits and tours, and these can range from small parties with specific interests to larger groups that want to see 'behind the scenes'. For the majority of people,



Figure 3. A montage of ornamental plant specimens held at the RHS herbarium. © The Royal Horticultural Society, 2017.

this will be their first encounter with an herbarium specimen.

However, we really want to target the collection to more specific audiences, i.e. taxonomists, plant breeders, and horticulturists (included in this category is our membership), students and school children, but we also want audiences to have fun with the collection.

Taxonomists

For this group, our aim is to increase engagement with the collections by speeding up the digitisation process to get our collections online as soon as possible, thus increasing accessibility. We have currently digitised over 30% of our sheets and hope to have these, and the rest, online soon. For our wild-collected specimens, we hope to make them accessible via GBIF (Global Biodiversity Information Facility), so it is more likely that they will be cited in monographs or the literature. We are also targeting taxonomists individually when we hear of research projects, and providing them with images of our specimens if they are too remote to visit.

Plant breeders and horticulturists

This group includes our members, who are very important to us as they fund our work, particularly digitising the collections. We have tried a number of different approaches to reach this audience, including: displays at some of the RHS shows, introducing our digitising programme; taking collections to external events; running workshops for Plant Heritage collection holders.



Figure 4. Demonstrating pressing and mounting techniques to Plant Heritage collection holders. © The Royal Horticultural Society, 2017.

School groups and students

For a number of years, the herbarium has participated in British Science Week, during which our science team runs workshops for visiting school groups. At these events, the herbarium has a small display of some of our collections, we show pressing and mounting techniques (and all participants take away a mounted herbarium specimen), and we also encourage the group to identify British plants using keys. It is amazing what can be fitted into 40 minutes!

From the early 1900s to the present day, the RHS's horticultural students' course has maintained a herbarium module. For this, our students present dried mounted collections of a specific genus. The RHS is also affiliated with the University of Reading, and their Masters students use the collections for their projects. There are also sponsorship opportunities via RHS bursaries for further study. Printed digitised sheets with interpretation have been produced that our education team can take to 'teacher training' days, and this could include the collections being used to demonstrate plant classification, weeds, plant hunters' contribution to modern day plants, etc.

Reaching new audiences via social media

The RHS herbarium is very lucky: not only do we have a collection of plant specimens for worthy and erudite academic use, but we have the advantage of working with a collection that has absolutely bonkers cultivar names that we can usually spin into a social media opportunity. Our collections have been used in a myriad of different ways, for instance to predict the winners of the Oscars and the Brits. We also try and participate in international events such as #AskACurator, #MuseumWeek, and #MuseumRainbow.

Twitter has been a very valuable tool in enabling the RHS to reach audiences for other programmes within the Society. A week of tweets of plants with tenuous links to One Direction resulted in a surge of young adults clicking on a profile linking to the RHS website. During that period, the RHS was seeking schools' participation in the 'Rocket Science' campaign (see Figure 5).

So, that was us dipping our toes into reaching new audiences. Suggestions are most welcome for ways to increase our audience participation with our amazing collection.

Tweet Activity

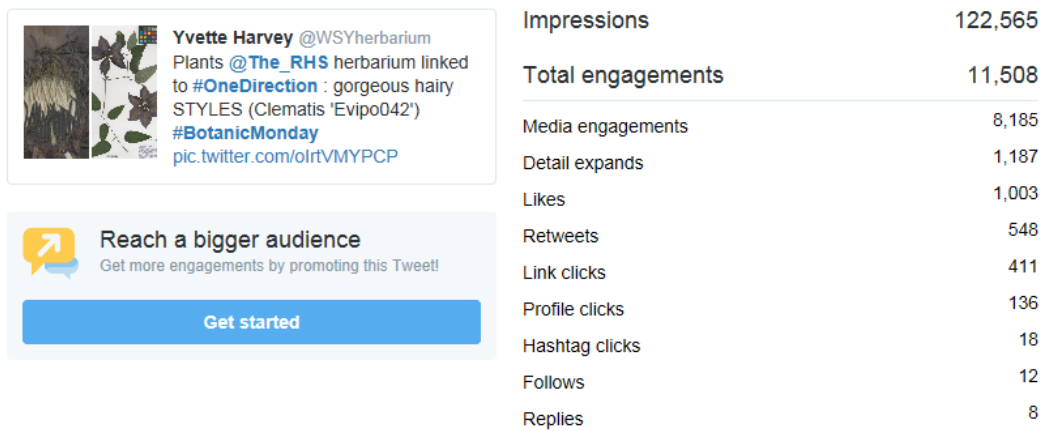


Figure 5. Analytics of a tweet, noting the large number of link and profile hits. © The Royal Horticultural Society, 2017.

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